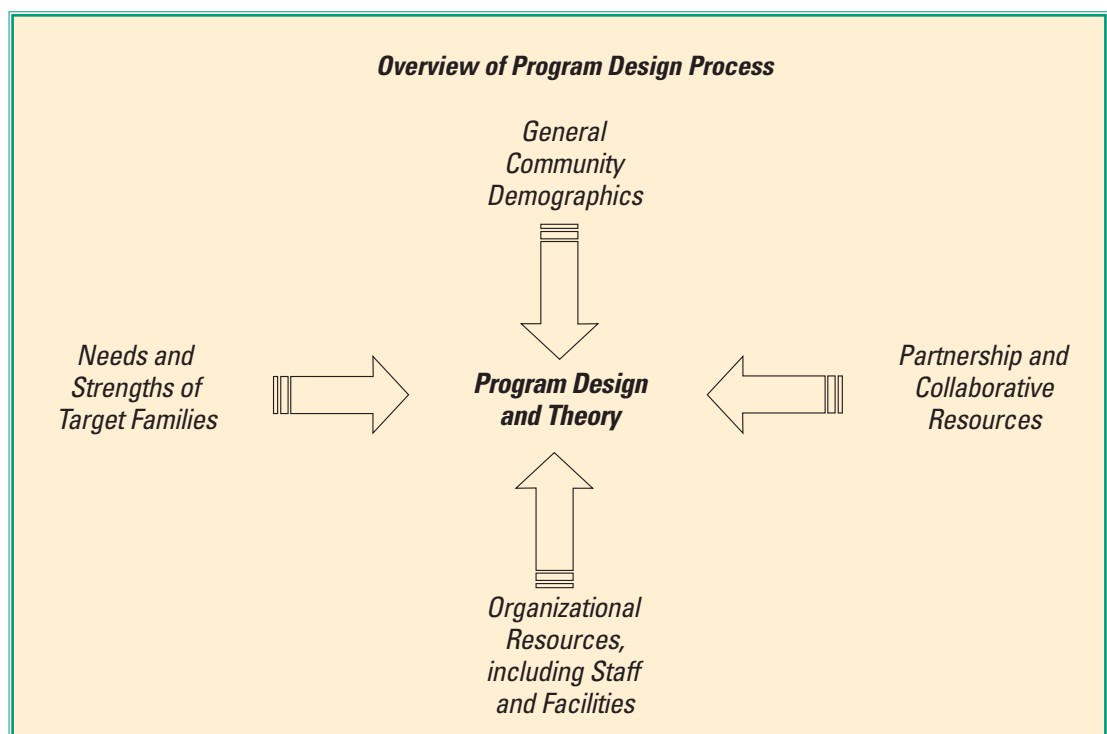# Chapter 4

Refining

the Program Design

Evaluation can play an important role in program design, especially for first-year projects and those that have been identified as needing improvement. Chapter 4 addresses how evaluation activities can inform program design. It covers:

- target populations;
- partnerships and collaborations;
- staffing and facilities; and
- program theory.

The first step in project design is to understand the project's context. Here context means the target community's demographics, the needs and strengths of target families, the nature of local partnerships and collaborations, and Even Start organizational resources such as staffing and facilities. The program evaluator helps project staff determine families' service delivery needs, the resources available to meet them, and the effectiveness of program services. These findings organize the program design.

Program theory sets the parameters of program design. Program theory consists of the assumptions and presuppositions that underlie program practices and distinguish family literacy from other educational approaches. These assumptions and presuppositions are a set of logical statements that serve as the theory, or rationale, for program design. Evaluators and program staff need to ensure a coherent relationship between the program design and intended outcomes. The figure below depicts the program design process.

Overview of Program Design Process

General Community Demographics

Needs and Strengths of Target Families → *Program Design and Theory* ← *Partnership and Collaborative Resources*

Organizational Resources, including Staff and Facilities

Faced with actually making the approved program design "come to life," project staff may find that they need to refine their original designs or even modify them to better match the context in which the program will take place. Making major modifications in design should be done with the assistance of information from the local evaluator—and with the clear understanding that local projects must receive permission from the state agency before changing approved program designs that were part of the initial proposal.

Target Populations

Project staff members need to maintain a thorough knowledge of the area's demographics, including poverty levels, languages spoken, and population density. This information

The federal statute governing Even Start requires programs to serve:
families most in need of services . . . as indicated by a low level of income, a low level of adult literacy or English language proficiency of the eligible parent or parents, and other need-related indicators (Section 1235(1), ESEA).

can usually be assembled from local service providers, census information, or geographical information systems (GIS), which are often made available on the World Wide Web. Project staff should re-examine their target area's demographics from time to time because populations can change.

Some Even Start programs adopt a family literacy delivery model without a sufficient understanding of the targeted population, with the result that the program design does not match the needs of the target population. Project staff members need to ask specific questions throughout the life of a program—during both planning and implementation—to ensure that the program design actually addresses the target population's needs.

Participation criteria. Once project staff have defined the target population, the next step is to develop criteria by which families who meet that definition will be recruited. This requires the input of key stakeholders, such as community representatives, current service providers, and educators. Family selection critera are usually developed in concert with a review of organizational and community resources (see sections on partnerships and collaboration, page 40). Project staff members need to re-visit this process periodically to make sure they are meeting the intent of the statue by recruiting and serving families most in need of services.

By statute, the project must consider income and literacy status in identifying those families most in need. Some projects develop additional criteria to further define the subset of families they are going to serve (teen parents, English language learners, etc). Criteria must be clearly defined.

Example: Understanding Participants' Constraints

In its grant proposal, an Even Start project planned to implement a program requiring adults to participate in morning and afternoon adult education and parenting classes. Though there was initially a strong demand for adult education classes, actual attendance was poor during certain months of the first year. On further investigation, the project evaluator realized that most of the families were migrant farm workers; their work schedules prevented them from attending daytime classes during harvest times. The program staff made the necessary schedule changes, and adult participation in the program increased.

Participant selection criteria could take the form of an instrument that reflects a program's service priorities and allows families to be ranked in order of need. Staff members should agree on the scoring and interpretation of a participant selection instrument. The example below shows a measurable, criterion-based family selection instrument that some projects use.

Sample Family Enrollment and Prioritization Form						
Indicators	Level Of Need Related To					
	0 N/A	1 Low	2	3	4	5 High
1. Poverty *						
2. Literacy Level of Adult*						
3. English Proficiency*						
4. Employment Status						
5. Homelessness						
6. Handicapping Condition						

*These criteria must be used to determine those most in need. Other criteria are optional.

Once program staff members have a clear understanding of the target population and the type of families to be recruited, they next assess those families' specific needs. For new projects, the assessment will target the population of potential families. The staff of ongoing projects should periodically re-assess families who are or were in the program.

Assessments can include surveys, one-to-one interviews, and focus groups; each has its strengths and weaknesses. The evaluator should ensure that the project uses appropriate assessments to determine the target population's needs, including screening assessments to determine language proficiency and skill level. Most projects administer formal assessments to adults once enrolled in order to determine the appropriate level of instruction.

Recommendations on Using Surveys with Adults with Limited Literacy Skills
- Questions are easy to understand and in the language(s) of the target population.
- The number of questions is as small as possible.
- The survey uses large print and is easy to read.
- Survey response items are unambiguous and easy to mark.
- Dichotomous (yes/no) or easy-to-use Likert scales are used.

Using surveys and focus groups. Program staff can assess families' literacy needs through a survey or questionnaire. A survey targeting adults with limited literacy skills should be easy to read and understand; survey questions should address the types of services needed by families.

Survey questions can garner information on when and where services should be offered. The example on page 39 illustrates a survey some Even Start projects use to ensure their activities are offered when families can participate.

Sample Family Literacy Scheduling Survey

Directions: Please place a ✓ in all the boxes that of times and events you and your children could likely attend. (You may choose more than one time.)

Activities	*Morning* *8 – 12 AM*	*Afternoon* *1 –3 PM*	*After school* *3 – 5 PM*	*Evening* *6 – 9 PM*
Adult Education Programs				
Parent Education Activities				
Infant Time				
Preschool				
School-age Activities				
Interactive Literacy Activities between parents and children				

Some adults may not have sufficient literacy skills to complete a survey. For this reason, projects may decide to use one-to-one or focus group interviews. One-to-one interviews have the advantage of targeting key informants (people with extensive information about the community) or potential participants with open-ended questions. The obvious disadvantages of one-to-one interviews are the considerable time indivdual interviews take and the limits on generalizing the results to the whole target population.

Both during project start-up and at regular intervals, project staff should use one-to-one interviews with key informants, including local literacy providers. They can offer a valuable perspective based on their own experience of providing services to the target population.

Focus groups usually contain no more than eight participants who are asked a series of open-ended questions.Their responses are recorded and later analyzed. Focus groups give the interviewer the luxury of asking follow-up questions to clarify responses. However, focus groups face many of the same limitations one-to-one interviews do, and focus groups may give give skewed results if an inexperienced interviewer allows one or two interviewees to dominate the conversation. Inexperienced program staff members should seek the evaluator's expertise when using one-to-one or focus group interviews.

The following sample questions could be used in one-to-one and focus group interviews:

- How did you hear about Even Start?
- What, if any, changes should be made in the early childhood, adult literacy, and parent education to better meet your needs?
- Are there any barriers that prevent you and your family from receiving services (prompts: language, access, scheduling, support services)?
- What changes would make the program better?

Partnerships and Collaborations

Both partnerships and collaborations support Even Start programs. Partnerships are formal relationships among one or more LEAs and one or more other non-profit public or private entities. Partnerships are eligible to apply for Even Start sub-grants. Collaborators may provide services, but are not formal partners in the "eligible entity" sense. They may be informal and have little bearing on day-to-day operations, or elaborate and require extensive commitments of time and resources. Both partnerships and collaborations are essential to avoid service duplications and to ensure long-term Even Start program sustainability.

Project staff should ask potential partners and collaborators for relevant service and evaluation reports and thoroughly examine the services proposed partners and collaborators have provided before making formal agreements. This is an important step to ensure that services offered to Even Start families are of high quality. This examination will likely require experts, including evaluators, to judge both the quality of services offered and the extent to which they meet the target population's needs. Even Start evaluators are independent of the program and are therefore uniquely positioned as "outsiders" to make recommendations that affect program delivery. Their independence is vital to maintaining objectivity in determining service quality.

All agreements with partners and collaborators should include a commitment to provide evaluation data and specifics about how services will be evaluated. These agreements should also reflect a mutual undertanding of the curricula and assessments to be used as well as standards to judge program success. Ongoing programs need to ask each of their partners and collaborators the critical questions, *Are services mutually planned and coordinated? Do organizational partners and collaborators provide high quality services to Even Start clients? How can services be improved?*

Many projects formally evaluate their partnerships and collaborations each year. This is helpful in determining both service quality and the extent to which projects are building sustainable family literacy programs. The example on page 41 shows an instrument that could be used to determine the strength of partnerships and collaborations.

Family Literacy Interagency Service and Resource Measure			
Name of Partner or Collaborating Agency:	Definitive Yes	Partially (to a limited extent)	Definitive No
	3	2	1
A. Getting Started			
1. Organization shares a detailed understanding of the Even Start project's goals and objectives.			
2. The organization shares the Even Start vision.			
B. Service Provision			
1. There is a formal agreement with the Even Start fiscal agent.			
2. There are specific, agreed-upon indicators by which the quality of services will be determined.			
C. Evaluation			
1. The collaborating agency agrees to share evaluation data.			
2. Meetings will be regularly scheduled to evaluate the success of the partnership or collaboration.			
3. A continuous improvement process addresses program weaknesses, and the organization is committed to participate in Even Start sponsored professional development activities.			

The federal statute requires Even Start projects to be operated by a partnership of one or more local educational agencies (LEA) and non-profit entities. Thus, Even Start projects usually operate within larger organizations' administrative structures and depend on them to varying degrees. The resources and administrative structures these organizations provide necessarily influence program implementation. A thorough examination of such an organization's resources, including administrative structure, staffing, and facilities is an important part of every evaluation. Important evaluation questions are:

- *How does the organization support the Even Start program?*
- *What internal barriers might impede the Even Start program?*
- *What can be done to make the Even Start program more successful?*

Staffing and Facilities

Hiring and training staff are key administrative functions of every Even Start project. Staffing is a principal variable affecting project quality, and local projects should dedicate resources to determine the qualifications and expertise of their staff in evaluating professional development activities.

Every state is mandated to implement minimum staffing qualifications for Even Start projects. Each local project must determine if its staff needs additional competencies to serve its target population effectively. For example, programs serving second-language populations may need instructional staff with certain linguistic capabilities. Because personnel quality is so important, projects should keep detailed records of staff qualifications. The example below is a personnel instrument for monitoring staff quality.

Quality of Personnel Record					
Position/ Name	Degrees Certificates and Credentials	Years of Experience Working in Family Literacy	Specialized Family Literacy Training	Language Proficiency	Time Devoted to Working With Even Start Families

It has been said that facilities drive programs—that is, facilities affect program delivery and design. This is especially true for family literacy programs, which address the instructional needs of adults, school-age children, preschoolers, and infant/toddlers. Some programs have adequate space; others struggle to secure sufficient space. The amount and quality of space are important, and often overlooked, variables which can deeply affect program quality. The key terms here are appropriateness and accessibility. Key questions include:

- ■ *Does the project have sufficient space to carry out its program activities?*
- ■ *Is the space appropriate to the ages of participants?*
- ■ *Do the instructional environments encourage literacy development?*
- ■ *Do the facilities encourage program integration and intergenerational activities?*
- ■ *Are the facilities accessible to parents and children with disabilities?*

The location of Even Start facilities is equally important. Even Start programs are offered in various locations, including schools, community centers, homes, churches, and prisons. Programs need to ask: *Are the facilities close enough to the target families? Is the staff located at the same site where services are offered? Is the site within walking distance of families with young children? If not, is free or low cost transportation available, or can the project provide it?*

Many Even Start programs offer services at more than one site. Some offer adult classes at one site and serve children at another site that may be a great distance away. Further, some rural Even Start projects offer services miles away from where families live. For them, an evaluation of program accessibility is especially in order. With the help of an evaluator, project staff may need to explore the feasibility of designing programs that feature alternative service delivery such as distance learning or additional home-based services.
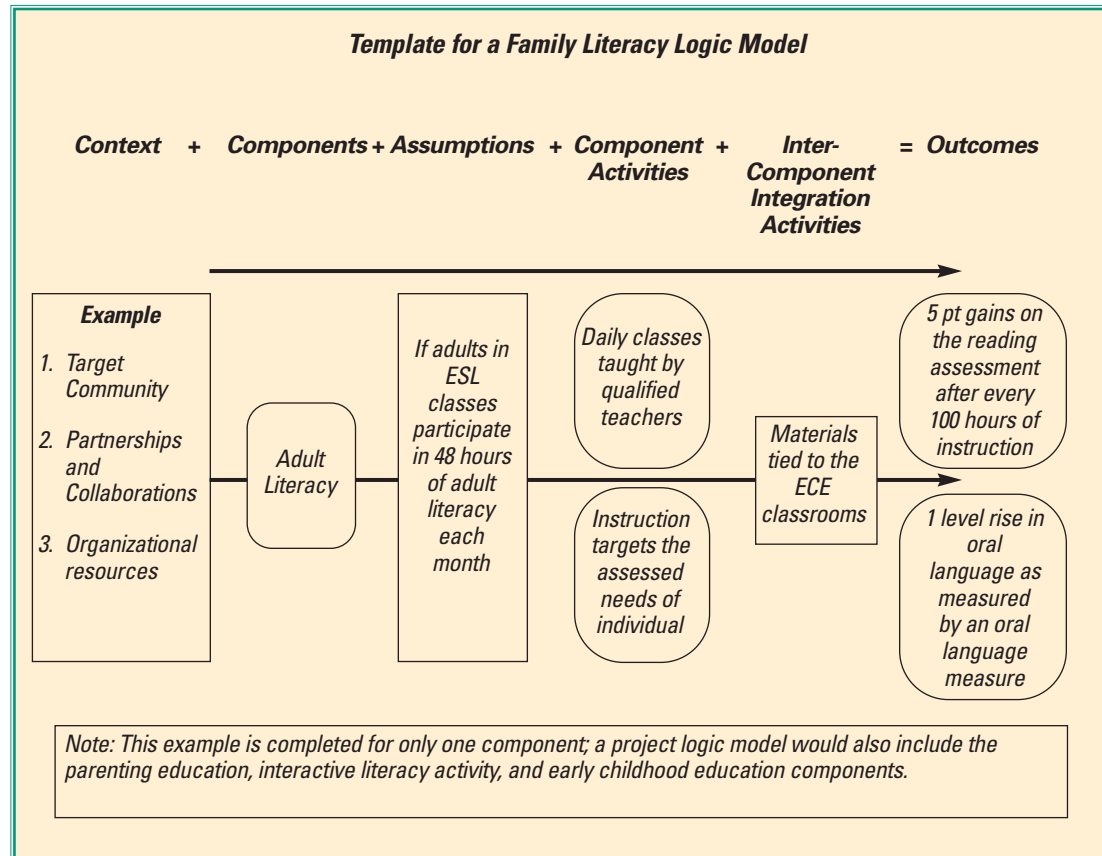
Program Theory

Program theory is the set of presuppositions, or logical statements, that serve as the rationale for the program and distinguish it from other educational approaches. A program's design and practices grow out of these underlying presuppositions.

The explicit theory of family literacy is that parents and their children engaged in concurrent, coordinated learning will achieve greater literacy outcomes. Family literacy involves more than the components of adult education, parent education, early childhood education, and interactive literacy activities between parents and children. Family literacy presupposes that the parallel involvement of parents and children in joint learning promotes greater literacy for both parents and children than if they were not mutually involved in the learning experience.

This theory of family literacy plays out in different ways at the local level, specifically in how programs integrate adult education, parent education, early childhood education, and interactive literacy activities between parents and children. Project staff members need to choose or develop a model of integration (plans for how the four components interact) that is best adapted to meet contextual realities.

The evaluator can also help projects recognize other, implicit, theories or beliefs inherent in the program's design, such as "Reinforcement of instruction in the home is necessary for all four core instructional components." The evaluator can help project staff make these beliefs explicit. To this end, many programs develop a logic model—a way of visualizing how the program design features interact. Developing a logic model can help connect context, design, resources, and outcomes and uncover the implicit beliefs that underlie the logic of the program design. There are several different types of logic models. The figure on page 44 presents a template for a simple logic model some family literacy projects use.

Template for a Family Literacy Logic Model

Context + Components + Assumptions + Component + Inter- = Outcomes
Activities Component
Integration
Activities

Example

1. Target Community

2. Partnerships and Collaborations

3. Organizational resources

Adult Literacy

If adults in ESL classes participate in 48 hours of adult literacy each month

Daily classes taught by qualified teachers

Instruction targets the assessed needs of individual

Materials tied to the ECE classrooms

5 pt gains on the reading assessment after every 100 hours of instruction

1 level rise in oral language as measured by an oral language measure

Note: This example is completed for only one component; a project logic model would also include the parenting education, interactive literacy activity, and early childhood education components.

Project directors are encouraged to engage their partners and collaborators in assessing partnerships and collaborations to ensure the best use of resources. Staff members should understand how current administrative structures, staffing, and facilities affect their program so they can suggest changes as needed.

Staff members should understand how their project's design will ultimately lead to services that produce literacy gains for children and adults. There should be an explicit link between program context, implementation, instructional activities, and anticipated outcomes. The project may need to revisit the design if program outcomes are not achieved.